

Rock that Became a Temple



By AMI BHAT

After 14 years in hiding, when King Valagamba finally returned to reclaim his throne in Anuradhapura around 89 BCE, he paid homage to a cave—a dark, wind-swept sanctuary carved deep into a 160-metre granite rock in the heart of Sri Lanka, just outside the dry plains of Dambulla. Here he carved a reclining Buddha into a rock, leaving behind a legacy that would only grow as other kings came; Nissanka Malla gilded the walls and left inscriptions of his generosity in Sinhalese.

Today, the Dambulla Cave Temple—also called the Golden Temple of Dambulla—is not just the largest and best-preserved cave complex in Sri Lanka, it is a place where 2,000-year-old walls bear mural-painted Buddhas; more than 150 statues of the Enlightened One sit, stand, lie, meditate, gaze down at you with half-closed eyes. You climb slowly—360 steps if you're counting—past monkeys and neem trees and clouds that drift below your feet. Take the King's Way to pass resting ledges where pilgrims pause and gaze out across the dry plains of central Sri Lanka, until finally the mouth of the cave opens before you like a secret revealed.

In Cave One, Devaraja

The Dambulla caves; (below) the reclining Biddha

Lena—the Cave of the Divine King—is a massive 14-metre reclining Buddha, carved directly from the rock, with Ananda, his disciple, kneeling by his feet, and nearby a statue of Lord Vishnu, silent guardian of the cave, a sign of Sri Lanka's unique Buddhist-Hindu layers of faith. Outside the cave, a Brahmi inscription confirms that monks have lived and worshipped here since the 1st century BCE.

In Maharaja Lena—the Great King's Cave—sit over 50 statues of the Buddha in postures of teaching, meditation, blessing, or repose; a white dagoba and Kandyan-era murals show scenes of Buddha's life and past lives and temples and trees and kings who once bowed low here. In a corner a stone pot catches water dripping from a crack in the ceiling, drop by drop, century after century, falls water with healing qualities. Walking down the long curve past is a massive Golden Buddha statue built in 2001, modern and brash against the older rock. Beside it, the museum and monastery saffron-robed monks light lamps and chant morning prayers. It is a living temple, alive with faith and footfalls and incense smoke curling in the air.

Dambulla is not a stopover, it is a stillness that lingers, it is the echo of kings and monks and barefoot pilgrims; it is stone turned into scripture, it is water that never stops flowing, it is Sri Lanka's memory pressed gently into the curve of a cave, waiting for you to enter.

